

Politics and Archaeology of AYODHYA

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Babri Mosque-Ramajnamabhumi Controversy in Retrospect

British administrator and archaeologist Alexander Cunningham, who served as the first director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), founded in 1861, conducted the first archaeological survey in 1862-1863, followed by the second one in 1889-1891. From these findings, he asserted that present-day Ayodhya is the authentic Ayodhya mentioned in the mythology of the Ramayana. This archaeological claim began to historicize the story of God Rama and initiated a legal dispute in the 19th century when a devotee filed a case in 1885, claiming the right to worship for Hindus in the Babri mosque premises.

More than 230 years after the construction of the Babri mosque, the first religious violence over the site took place in 1853 during the reign of Nawab Wajid Shah of Awadh/Ayodhya when Nirmohi, a Hindu sect, claimed that a Hindu temple was destroyed to build the mosque. Six years later, a British administrator erected a fence to divide it into two parts: Muslims



Babri Masjid at the top of the hill, seen from the Ghaghara River in 1783, drawn by William Hodges

horrifying mob attack, took revenge for this demolition by vandalizing deities and temples revered by the Hindu minority. Over 3,000 people were estimated to be killed during these mayhem. It might not be an overstatement to say that the Babri mosque demolition has changed the politics of India and the secular foundation of the country forever.

This event played a pivotal role for the BJP to win the national election in 1998 and achieve landslide victories in subsequent elections, destroying the Indian National Congress and incrementally rising to power based on the ideology of Hindu Nationalism or Hindutva, in opposition to secularism as the hegemonic statist discourse that drives Indian politics today. Historian Ramachandra Guha maintained, "No single event in independent India has polarized public opinion as much as the Babri

Birthplace of a God

The Supreme Court unanimously announced the Ayodhya verdict in November 2019, based on a detailed discussion of the report by the ASI. The court also mentioned some unanswered questions, such as whether the reason for the destruction of the early structure was to build a mosque on the site. The underlying structure, dated to the 12th century, indicates a four-century time gap from the construction of the mosque: "No evidence is available to explain what transpired in the course of the intervening period of nearly four centuries."

It also stated: "On 6 December 1992, the mosque's structure was brought down, and the mosque was destroyed. The destruction of the mosque took place in breach of the order of the status quo and an assurance given to this Court. The

on the landscapes of conflict (Shackel 2003: 3), played out at full scale in the Ayodhya controversy. It exemplifies "The act of archaeology is a form of commemoration that highlights the issues that private groups or government agencies see as worth remembering" (ibid: 4).

Different competing and conflicting versions of the past have been confronted to recreate a singular past and subvert others, communicated through new media, government ceremonies, performative state rituals, construction of statues, monuments, and temples within the power politics where the discipline of archaeology has been used as the provider of the seal of scientific validation for those claims. We need to be aware of the possible consequences of excavation and realize that archaeological invention may lead to further (re-)

in the living society at present, where archaeology plays an authoritative role.

3. Acknowledging the right to religious freedom and protecting sacred sites, as well as embracing contesting religious claims.

4. Taking moral and ethical responsibility with disciplinary integrity for the consequences of the revivalist movement at present, triggered by excavation and exploration.

How to build peace with the contesting religious claims

Indian archaeology exemplifies how the social and cultural milieu of archaeological practice can shape the nature of archaeological research, causing more far-flung consequences than initially intended. The intention and goal of archaeological projects and the subjectivity of archaeologists within the milieu often remain as our blind spots, determining the nature of control and management of the land and sites, as seen in the treatment of an authorized research project, such as the series of excavations in Ayodhya.

Creating and controlling the collective national memory of revered sacred sites and objects is an integral part of building national identity and holding dominance and power. The designing of landscapes and monumental identity markers serves as strategies of power infused with value, providing a symbolic medium of power relation. The process of archaeology, as Shackel (2003) explicates, facilitates the creation of a particular memory of the past on several levels that are important in this case: the act of finding, locating, and documenting the site as an act of commemoration, which draws attention from the discipline as well as the community, recognizing the site's potential religious significance and national heritage, and thus it must be conserved by the state, finally creating a novel intention to recreate a marker on the landscape and designate the



The first significant assault on the Babri Masjid was reported in October 1990 when thousands of Kar Sevaks, led by the VHP, stormed the mosque, and police firing killed six of them. Image: Anand Swaroop Verma. COURTESY: NEWS18.COM, SEPT 30, 2020.

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were allowed to pray inside, and the outer court was designated for Hindu worship.

The lawsuit was initiated by the Hindu ascetic Rama worshipper group, Nirmohi Akhara. Placing an idol of infant Rama, known as Rama Lalla, under the central dome of the mosque in 1949 and demanding control of the property heightened the tension. This evolved into a full-fledged powerful religious revivalist movement called Rama Janmabhumi, aiming to restore, preserve, and worship the birthplace of Rama, declaring Ayodhya as the sacred place for all Indian Hindus. The Rama Janmabhumi movement finally culminated in the demolition of the mosque within the next four decades.

Hindu nationalists alleged that this 16th-century mosque was built in 1528, destroying the Rama mandir (temple of Rama) by the Mughal emperor Zahir Uddin Babur's commander, Mir Baqi, repurposing the foundational pillars and remains. In 1980, the deity himself became a party represented by "friends" in the title suits, and the entire plot of land was claimed to belong to the deity. On behalf of the Muslims, the Sunni Waqf Board claimed control of the site. In a spectacular performative act of violence on December 6, 1992, widely broadcasted in the media, the Babri mosque was torn down by hundreds of thousands of Hindu militant mobs (consisting of the hardliner Vishva Hindu Parishad/World Hindu Council and its affiliate organizations) incited by some leaders of the opposition Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). Reportedly, over 15,000 Hindu activists, called kar sevaks, brought the historic mosque down to the ground with axes, hammers, and other weapons.

This event prompted a bloody riot in India and sparked a series of violent events, fueling pre-existing communal tension within and across the borders, resonating around South Asia. The mobs in Pakistan (a Muslim-majority country over the border) attacked 35 temples across the country. In Bangladesh (the other Muslim-majority neighbor), militant Muslims, mirroring the



The grand opening of the recreated Rama Temple on 70-acre of land in Ayodhya's demolished Babri mosque site was held on January 22, 2024.

mosque demolition." Sociologist Indranil Acharya echoed Guha, stating, "It has increased tension between the Hindu majority and Muslim minority. In the following years, India witnessed many violent events such as the 2002 Gujarat riots."

The Government of India commissioned the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to excavate and find evidence of a Rama temple beneath the demolished mosque site in 2002. After 16 years of excavation (May-June 2003), ASI submitted a 574-page report to the Supreme Court of India in August 2019, confirming the existence of a temple-like structure at the site of the Babri mosque. This report affirms the short-lived construction of a mega structure of about 50 meters and the construction of the Babri Masjid over the earlier structure. These archaeological findings played a key role throughout the process and in the final decision made on the title of the disputed site. The Supreme Court recognized the ASI report (2003) as scientific evidence of the existence of the Rama mandir, dismissing another report (1991) by historians who rejected the possibility of any such temple as politically motivated opinions.

Scientific Evidence Vindicated the

destruction of the mosque and the obliteration of the Islamic structure were egregious violations of the rule of law."

The court ordered the construction of the Rama temple on the site of the demolished mosque, indicating in the report that the "foundation of the (16th-century) mosque was based on the walls of a large pre-existing structure that dates back to the 12th century, and recoveries were suggestive of a structure of Hindu religious origin."

A trust was set up by the central government to oversee the construction, and another 5 acres of land in Ayodhya were allocated for building a new mosque. The Sunni Waqf Board accepted the alternative spot. The construction of the recreated Rama temple was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a grand ceremonial performance broadcast live on national TV channels in 2020.

Moral and Ethical Responsibility of Excavation

How various communities can use archaeology to remember particular historical events and forget others, and how groups selectively use collective memory, symbols, and landscapes to reinforce a specific meaning and defuse others, as Paul Shackel illustrated in his argument



View of the Babri Mosque, c. 1863-1887

PHOTOGRAPHER: SAMUEL BOURNE

invention of identities and new consciousness of who we are.

The building of massive sacred structures, whether temple, mosque, or church, serves as symbolic control over the landscape and cultural environment. This is a mechanism to display social, material, racial, gendered, and class control and to produce/reproduce/establish social hierarchies and organize social relations. These are also artifacts with meaning that express some cultural ideals, which can never be totally agreed upon by everyone in any society. There is no way to escape or ignore the society-in-making through conflicting beliefs. The political stakes of this process and the ongoing tensions between and within groups for control over public memory of the landscape of conflicts need to be taken into consideration in excavation projects (Shackel 2003: 9).

The Babri Masjid-Rama Janmabhumi debate entails complex overlapping epistemological and ethical issues in the disciplinary practice that I tease out as follows:

1. The need for the recognition of the socio-cultural milieu of the archaeological tradition.

2. Understanding the necessity of establishing cultural authenticity and historical connections for the legitimacy of dominance and power

site for remembering a golden age as a form of commemoration.

When a site is recognized as sacred for contesting faiths, archaeologists need to assess the moral issues and ethical risks involved while planning and designing their research projects, interpreting the remains, and presenting them in public. Discussing these competing interests from the perspective of human rights, such as the right to religious freedom, allows us to move beyond the focus on authenticity and objective analysis only. Employing arguments for the rights of religious freedom is another aspect of the Babri Masjid dispute divergent from claims of cultural authenticity and historical connection. In this line of argument, whether the birthplace of Rama genuinely existed on the site or not is insignificant; religious belief and feeling are what matter. The challenge with these competing beliefs is how to build peace with the contesting religious claims without hurting others' religious ethos and dignity as a community and establish a mutually respectful solution.

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The references to the article are available in the online version.